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Accord will federalize airport security workers

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WASHINGTON -- Congressional negotiators announced a deal Thursday to tighten airport security in the wake of the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks, including an agreement to replace the private contractors in charge of screening baggage and passengers with federal employees within a year.

To win the support of House Republicans and the White House, which opposed federalizing the security personnel, airports would be given the opportunity to re-privatize security after three years.

The agreement cleared the way for the Senate and the House of Representatives to vote today on the legislation, eight weeks after terrorists hijacked four airliners and attacked the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, killing about 4,500 people.

Both chambers are expected to pass the measure easily and President Bush is likely to sign it into law by Thanksgiving, traditionally the busiest travel period of the year.

Bush hailed the agreement and said he looked forward to signing the legislation. ``When it comes to safety," he said, ``we will set high standards and enforce them."

Transportation Secretary Norman Mineta said the federal government expected to hire, train and deploy 28,000 to 29,000 screeners in the next 12 months. ``We feel we'll have to go on some kind of a wartime footing in order to train these people well," Mineta said.

The bill also would greatly increase the number of plainclothes federal marshals assigned randomly to flights, would require cockpit doors to be reinforced and locked during flight, would permit pilots to carry guns if they passed a training program and would require that all checked bags be screened for explosives. At present, fewer than 10 percent of such bags are screened.

The first-year cost of the added security measures is put at \$2.6 billion, of which airlines would pay \$700 million to \$1 billion per year.

To help pay for the increased security measures, the legislation would impose a \$2.50 fee per passenger for each airplane boarded, with a maximum charge of \$5 per one-way trip no matter how many planes were boarded. The maximum fee for a round-trip ticket would be \$10.

The central issue holding up the bill had been the status of baggage screeners.

The Senate had wanted to make all such workers federal employees, but House conservatives and the White House fought to allow private firms to keep doing the work under strict government supervision.

Currently, airlines contract out the work, usually to the lowest-bidding firms. The workers receive little training and are paid little more than minimum wage in some cases, and annual turnover exceeds 100 percent at some airports, according to the congressional General Accounting Office.

Under the lawmakers' compromise, federal supervisors would be deployed immediately and screening checkpoints would be staffed entirely by federal employees within one year. Federal screening would continue for two more years, but then airport authorities could "opt out" and privatize security if they could prove it would be done at least as securely as under the federal system.

Advocates of federal screening doubt many airports will return to private workers.

"It would be very difficult for airports to opt out once they have a good secure system in place" said Rep. Mike Honda, D-San Jose.

The new screeners would not be permitted to strike and are required to be U.S. citizens, Mineta said.

The legislation would cover all airports except for five yet-to-be-identified facilities of varying size that would be permitted to experiment with privately run security systems under federal supervision. The Department of Transportation would choose the five airports; their participation would be voluntary.

House conservatives led by Majority Whip Tom DeLay, R-Texas, had spearheaded the fight for retaining private firms in air security. But Senate negotiators prevailed after Sen. Ernest "Fritz" Hollings, D-S.C., refused to endorse any bill that did not immediately turn over screening to the government.

Hollings let it be known that he was willing to let negotiations go beyond Thanksgiving, which heightened pressure on the House to make a deal.

Rep. Don Young, R-Alaska, said House conservatives were handicapped in negotiations by the Senate's unusually strong bipartisan unity behind full federalization. Last month the Senate voted 100-0 to bring all 28,000 screeners into the federal workforce. By contrast, DeLay had to work hard for every vote for his hybrid approach, which the House endorsed earlier this month by only 218-214.

The House won one other major disagreement: The Department of Transportation will retain control over air security rather than the Department of Justice, which the Senate had favored. The Department of Transportation has traditionally been friendly with airlines, deferring at times to commercial pressures. The Justice Department is a law enforcement agency, which senators thought would be less likely to bow to the airlines.

The New York Times contributed to this report.

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